

F I L M R E V I E W



Film Notes

INKHEART

DIRECTED BY: IAIN SOFTLEY

STARRING: BRENDAN FRASER (MO "SILVERTONGUE" FOLCHART), SIENNA GUILLORY (RESA), ELIZA BENNETT (MEGGIE FOLCHART), ANDY SERKIS (CAPRICORN), PAUL BETTANY (DUSTFINGER), HELEN MIRREN (ELINOR LOREDAN), JIM BROADBENT (FEROGLIO)

RUNNING TIME: 106 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

PHOTO COURTESY OF APPLAUSE

# Better than the book

Brendan Fraser's chunkiness as a kind of bulked-up Indiana Jones is one of the few jarring notes in 'Inkheart,' an otherwise commendable minor fantasy film

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER

We have seen rather a lot of Brendan Fraser recently, what with *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* and *Journey at the Center of the Earth* both released in the second half of last year. He's back again, and while *Inkheart* is a vastly superior film to his previous efforts, his presence contributes little to its success. In fact, his muscular appeal strikes one of the few jarring notes in an otherwise commendable minor fantasy film.

*Inkheart* has the same bookish quality that distinguished *The Chronicles of Narnia* films, from its rather rudimentary special effects to the understated complexity of its characters. Fraser is from a much slicker (if not necessarily more convincing) world of make-believe, and he is anything but understated. While he is never less than an appealing screen presence, his efforts as Mo Folchart, a kind of bulked-up Indiana Jones, a specialist book binder who inexplicably seems perfectly at home with a powerful left hook, shines out like polyester among old silk.

But be that as it may, there is lots of good acting, a splendid plot and a string of mildly funny literary jokes (referencing *The Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan* and *Sinbad the Sailor*) mean that there is plenty to be getting on with.

As for the story, Mo Folchart is a silvertongue, a person who is able, by reading aloud, to bring forth the characters out of stories. But there is a *quid pro quo*, and if something comes out of the book, something else has to go in, and Mo, accidentally bringing forth Capricorn and a crew of villains out of a fantasy novel titled "Inkheart," loses his wife to the book. He spends many years looking for a new copy of the book and avoiding the attentions of the various characters that he inadvertently read out of "Inkheart."

Around this conceit of how we make books come alive, director Iain Softley sets

up a mood of comic adventure. There is none of the moralizing of *Narnia* or the philosophizing of *The Golden Compass*, but just a good yarn with lots of fascinating characters in it. At the center is Meggie, Mo's daughter and companion, an aspiring writer, who only gradually realizes why her father has never read her a bedtime story though they live surrounded by books. Meggie's growing realization of her father's story and her response are reasonably compelling and are well rendered by Eliza Bennett.

The star turn is left to Andy Serkis, who creates the Monty Python-esque villain Capricorn, the character out of a swords and sorcery fantasy who has made himself at home in Italy and doesn't want to go back to the grotty medieval world of the novel. Paul Bettany, as the conflicted Dustfinger, once again shows what an excellent ensemble actor he is, with that special ability not only to make himself look good, but to make others shine as well.

Then there's Helen Mirren, who has taken off her various crowns and settled down as an old-fashioned pantomime dame, playing Meggie's aunt, a batty old bookworm who gets caught up in the adventure against her will. She gets to ride into battle on a unicorn, which is something neither of the Queen Elizabeths she recently played ever did. Jim Broadbent, also in comic mood, plays Fergoglio, the author of "Inkheart," who just loves to see his novel brought to life, but cannot quite refrain from giving away the ending — to the chagrin of the participants.

So without giving away any more of the story, *Inkheart* can be recommended wholeheartedly as ideal Lunar New Year viewing for the whole family. One or two sequences might be upsetting for very young children, but on the whole the mood is playful rather than frightening, and its loosely allegorical treatment of a reader's relationship with the books gives it some depth as well.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea

The pick of this week's other releases is an award-winning film from legendary Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki (*Spirited Away*). Sort-of-mermaid Ponyo longs to know more about the world out of the ocean and soon becomes the pet of a boy who lives in a seaside home. Her disappearance triggers a hunt that results in wonderful sequences that will captivate adults and children alike. Miyazaki's box office hit is glorious proof that possibilities still exist for traditional animation techniques. It's being screened in Taiwan in both Mandarin and Japanese-language versions.



Yes Man

In this comedy outing, Jim Carrey transforms from a soulless loan officer who will only say "no" into an increasingly havoc-stricken man who can only say "yes." TV director Peyton Reed manages to wring some physical humor and smutty gags out of Carrey, but for most who saw *Liar Liar* it will be same old, same old — though co-star Zooey Deschanel (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) got the big "yes" from male critics. Maybe the film should have been called "Yes Woman."



Bride Wars

Ah, the latest wedding-themed movie. Budding brides Anne Hathaway and Kate Hudson end up at each other's throats after their receptions are double-booked. The rest is marzipan-painted color-by-numbers with standard American comedy-turned-hand-wringing in the final reel. Marketed at the underestimating teenager and her girlfriends or luckless boyfriend in tow, *Bride Wars* should be packed off to a galaxy far, far away.



Life for Sale

This Switzerland-Luxembourg co-production revisits the legend of Faust as three losers come up with the idea of respectively selling their past, future and soul online. At first swimming in cash — by itinerant standards — the three friends discover that money isn't everything (they must have dropped out of school before that lesson was taught). Purportedly inspired by a true story. Original title: *Luftbusiness*.



Rabbit Without Ears

A German reporter gets busted for excessive paparazzi-like behavior and is sentenced to 300 hours of community service. Schwarzeneggeresque fish-out-of-water romantic comedy hijinks ensue when the reporter is forced to play Kindergarten Hack and answer to a woman whom he once dissed as a child. The rest writes itself. This *Rabbit* is a German box office smash and deserves a local audience. The Taiwanese poster, by the way, adds cutout rabbit ears to our reluctant hero's slumbering head — presumably to make the literally translated title more comprehensible.



Caravaggio

The groundbreaking painter and compulsive troublemaker is the subject of this European made-for-TV production from 2007. His painting, brawling, lust and political machinations are all here. Appropriately shot by master cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, this version of the artist's life and times is gorgeous to watch. Originally three hours long in two episodes, this theatrical version has been cut down to two hours.



Flashbacks of a Fool

Daniel Craig makes a sensational new James Bond, but if he keeps making non-007 films like this, he may need to stay with the franchise a little longer than expected. In *Flashbacks*, Craig portrays a dissolute celebrity on the verge of stateside self-destruction. His flashbacks in England as a teenager tell us why — sort of. Directed by music video ace Baillie Walsh (*Massive Attack's Unfinished Sympathy*, for example), the film is big on melancholy and period atmosphere but not so on psychological credibility. Starts next Friday.



Naruto the Movie Vol. 5

The latest in the *Naruto* series of manga-based films is the second in the Shippuden cycle that covers the youthful ninja's later period. In this episode, rival ninja launch a major attack on our hero's homeland, and Naruto and his companions must brave various dangers — including a romantic subplot — to come to its defense. Also known as *Naruto Shippuden: Kizuna*. Starts next Friday.



Melman the giraffe, voiced by David Schwimmer, left, Gloria the hippo, voiced by Jada Pinkett Smith, second left, Alex the lion, voiced by Ben Stiller, and Marty the zebra, voiced by Chris Rock, right.

# Duck! The penguins are flying the plane

From the confines of Madagascar, this matey menagerie finds itself transported to the vast wilderness of Africa

BY MANOHLA DARGIS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

There's a nuttier, generally more diverting entertainment creeping, crawling and waddling along the edges of *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* than the larger one lollygagging on screen. This central story of this new animated movie, written by Etan Cohen and the directors Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath, involves Alex (Ben Stiller in low gear), a lion who in 2005 journeyed from New York captivity (ie, a zoo) to the jungle in the first *Madagascar* with the usual mix of celebrity-voiced racial and ethnic stereotypes: a motor-mouthed zebra, Marty (Chris Rock); a nice if woefully neurotic giraffe, Melman (David Schwimmer); and the token girl, a hippo with a sizeable caboose named Gloria (Jada Pinkett Smith).

Three years later Alex and company are literally ejected from Madagascar in a rickety plane operated by a penguin crew that's led by the supremely confident, quite

possibly insane Skipper (McGrath), a sleek ball of feathers and fat who simultaneously brings to mind Jon Lovitz, Phil Hartman, John Wayne and a cue ball. Along with his two sidekicks, a couple of stooges called Kowalski and Private (Chris Miller and Christopher Knights), Skipper keeps first the plane and then — after crash-landing on an African savannah — the movie moving with his deadpan delivery and with some surrealistic nonsense involving a barrel of laughing monkeys. (I see a big future for Mason and his silent partner, Phil, the two-chimp team whose lah-di-dah manners and sartorial flair recall that of the 1970s television ape, Lancelot Link.)

With King Julien, a deranged lemur whose daft non sequiturs and bon mots are dropped and dribbled with dexterity and control by an unrecognizable Sacha Baron Cohen (at times sounding like a less frantic Robin Williams), the penguins and chimps could have skittered into something memorable. Alas,

the filmmakers, who clearly are having as much fun visually with these scene stealers as they are aurally, stick by the contemporary American animation playbook: Alex has a dream (gotta dance), father issues (with Bernie Mac as the pride of the pride) and a requisite baddie rival (Alec Baldwin, who else?). There's also an unfunny old lady with a Jackie Mason accent who deserves a violently cruel end, but this is a PG movie.

Darnell and McGrath don't appear especially committed to these stale conceits and character dynamics, which may explain why they spend so much time playing with the penguins, chimps and King Julien, who may not roar but certainly rules. There's true playfulness here whenever this wacky animal pack takes over, a suggestion of delirium echoed by the zippy, at times overly zooming camerawork with its roller-coaster dips and swoops. And while the filmmakers throw the camera

around almost as much as Brian de Palma does, every so often they slow down, giving you a chance to scan the softly muted colors of the landscapes and explore how the exaggerated character designs create a nice visual contrast with the photorealistic details and flourishes.

It's unsurprising that Alex's mane registers as more realistic than any of his words or emotions, but it's also a bummer. *Escape 2 Africa* is good enough in patches to make its distracting star turns, storybook clichés and stereotypes harder to take than they would be in a less enjoyable movie. Casting Stiller and Schwimmer may sear their brands onto under-age cerebral cortices but does nothing for the movie. And, really, did the hippo (voiced by will.i.am from the Black Eyed Peas) who courts Gloria with a low rumble and a suggestive shimmy have to sound like Barry White rather than, say, Marc Anthony or Justin Timberlake? I laughed, but honestly,

if this country can vote colorblind surely its movie studios can animate colorblind too. (Can't they?)

Film Notes

MADAGASCAR: ESCAPE 2 AFRICA

DIRECTED BY: ERIC DARNELL AND TOM MCGRATH

WITH THE VOICES OF: BEN STILLER (ALEX), CHRIS ROCK (MARTY), DAVID SCHWIMMER (MELMAN), JADA PINKETT SMITH (GLORIA), SACHA BARON COHEN (KING JULIEN), CEDRIC THE ENTERTAINER (MAURICE), ANDY RICHTER (MORT), BERNIE MAC (ZUBA), SHERRI SHEPHERD (ALEX'S MOM), ALEC BALDWIN (MAKUNGA), TOM MCGRATH (SKIPPER), CONRAD VERNON (MASON), WILL.I.AM (MOTO MOTO)

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